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Cambridge Journal of Education
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ccje20

What is a child? Children's perceptions, the Cambridge Primary Review and implications for education

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Published online: 11 Feb 2014.

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To cite this article: Kate Adams (2014) What is a child? Children's perceptions, the Cambridge Primary Review and implications for education, Cambridge Journal of Education, 44:2, 163-177, DOI: 10.1080/0305764X.2013.860082

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0305764X.2013.860082

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Cambridge Journal of Education, 2014
Vol. 44, No. 2, 163–177, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0305764X.2013.860082

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What is a child? Children's perceptions, the Cambridge Primary Review and implications for education

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(*Received 19 November 2012; final version received 18 October 2013*)

Debate about the definition of a 'child' occurs in multi-disciplinary contexts, most recently located in the new sociology of childhood where social constructionism is the dominant discourse. Given that the child's voice has become an increasingly valued component of research, this paper reports on one aspect of a study which explored how 7–11-year-olds (N = 56) defined and understood the concept of 'a child'. Data were categorised into four types: physical, behavioural, lifestyle and criteria-referenced descriptors. Dominant theoretical elements such as agency, social construction, relational understanding and notions of themselves as beings were evident in the children's responses. However, the importance of the biological and developmental bases of childhood and their sense of becoming adults were stronger than is sometimes acknowledged in the literature. The implications for education of these two digressions from contemporary theoretical discourse are considered in light of the Cambridge Primary Review which calls for a reshaping of primary education and initial teacher training in England to include childhood as a central concept.

Keywords: childhood; children's perceptions; child's voice; beings and becomings; Cambridge Primary Review; initial teacher training

Introduction

Understandings of what constitutes a good childhood are regularly debated in countries such as the UK, USA and Australia, where concerns about the quality of childhood and young people's well-being abound (e.g. Layard & Dunn, 2009; Palmer, 2006; Postman, 1982/1994; UNICEF, 2007). Conceptions of what 'childhood' is are largely socially constructed and thus vary across and within cultures over time. Education policy plays a significant role in shaping conceptions of what childhood is, communicated through the respective systems' aims, structures and practices (James & James, 2008). Whilst the primary shapers of childhood are adults, children are also engaged in negotiating meanings as they shape and interpret their world (Fattore, Mason, & Watson, 2009; James & James, 2008; Qvortrup, 1994). This emphasis on children's autonomy is reflected in the growing interest in understanding children's experiences and perspectives (Smith, 2010; Tangen, 2008). However, many texts on childhood do not refer directly to children's opinions (exceptions include Alexander & Hargreaves, 2007; Mayall, 2003; Morgan, 2005; Layard & Dunn, 2009).

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This study, which gathers children's views, is contextualised in light of a major independent review of the primary curriculum in England: the Cambridge Primary Review (CPR) (Alexander, 2010). Launched in 2006, the CPR gathered significant amounts of evidence for its in-depth report, in addition to other forms of dissemination, policy engagement and the building of professional capacity and networks. In 2010 it published 75 evidence-based recommendations for educational reform in England, which included placing childhood at the heart of primary education and identifying childhood as one of three overarching perspectives of the nationwide study. The review recommends that the exploration of childhood should be a key focus in initial teacher training (ITT).

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The social construction of childhood

Whilst childhood has a biological basis, involving identifiable stages of physical and physiological development, it is predominantly conceptualised as a social construct (James & James, 2004; Smith, 2010). The nature of all constructions is inevitably complex, and the understandings of childhood vary in different contexts (Waller, 2009). Furthermore, a variety of conceptualisations can be held concurrently, for example: children being innocent and in need of protection at the same time as being out of control; as investments in the future in need of sacrifices from parents; and/or as consumers (Thurtle, 2005). Boundaries between such conceptualisations are not fixed, however, and views such as those of children being out of control, or criminals, relate to the presociological notion of the child as evil. Whilst the latter is an historical concept which posits that vice is an inherent constituent of a child, it is an image which is still present and particularly evident in contemporary media reports (James, Jenks, & Prout, 2006).

At the macro level, education policy imposes notions of childhood both explicitly and implicitly. For example, in the UK, US and more recently Australia, these education systems employ 'high stakes, standardised testing' in which pupils' results are presented in public forums (Polesel, Dulfer, & Turnball, 2012, p. 6). Such an approach has met with considerable concern pertaining to the negative impacts on children's well-being, learning, teaching and curriculum, as Polesel et al. (2012) detail. Furthermore, James and James (2004) argue that school curricula such as England's National Curriculum, which involve regular testing with results published in publicly available league tables, serve to frame childhood as a time of preparation for adulthood. Whilst such a claim would benefit from empirical evidence, requiring an analysis of a wide range of other factors that also influence children's sense of self in the present and future, it is a thought-provoking argument. One possible outcome of such a regime embodies a sense of children as 'becomings'; a focus on what children will become in later life as opposed to a focus on what and who they are now, in the present, as 'beings' (Uprichard, 2008, p. 303). Viewing children as beings has become the dominant perspective, especially in the new sociology of childhood (Tangen, 2008), and has arisen out of critiques of earlier research which framed children as adults-in-the-making; a limiting perspective which fails to recognise and value children for who they are and what they can offer in the present.

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Social actors and agency

Within the school, a variety of actors interact with each other, with policy and wider society, to shape the concept of childhood. Within school, these actors include teaching staff, non-teaching staff and visitors, each with their own sets of values and meanings. However, adults are not the only players, with children also increasingly viewed as social actors who have a role in negotiating their own childhood (Tangen, 2008; Waller, 2009). Children are understood to possess agency which enables them to shape and interpret their world and construct meaning (Fattore et al., 2009; James & James, 2008; Qvortrup, 1994). James et al. (2006, p. 6) propose that children's active role moves them away from the concept of socialisation which views them as 'a defective form of adult, social only in their future potential but not in their present being'. In addition, the social positions of adult and child are inherently relational in that one cannot exist without the other (Alanen, 2001; Mayall, 2001, 2003; Qvortrup, 2008). This relational concept is also affected by other internal relations such as gender, class, ethnicity and 'race' (Alanen, 2001). For example, Mayall's (2003) study indicated that children learnt gender roles in the home, in this case primarily with females (their mothers) undertaking responsibility for home and childcare whilst males (their fathers) had financial responsibilities. Some children also indicated that they had learnt particular cultural or religious practices in the home, from the adults.

The generational and relational components of childhood are well established, as indeed is the social constructionist approach to childhood. Constructionism is of immense value in this field. However, Lee (2009, pp. 1–2) observes that it potentially 'interprets all differences between adults and children as the works of imagination' and risks 'overemphasising the ability of imagination to shape the world'. Such a critique is important as it raises the question of the degree to which the world is socially constructed, and how much is determined by nature as well as the ways in which the social and biological interact.

Children's conceptualisations of childhood

The role of the child as actor affords them a voice in the discussion of what childhood is (Smith, 2010). Previous studies of young people's perspectives on childhood have elicited recurring themes, with several researchers seeking to identify what is important to children. For example, Mayall (2003), Morgan (2005) and Layard and Dunn (2009) all found that children reported family as highly important. In addition, play often features as a defining characteristic of childhood (see Mayall, 2003; Moss & Petrie, 2002; Thorne, 1993). The importance of friends has also been elicited in different studies (see Mayall, 2003; Moss & Petrie, 2002; Thorne, 1993).

Children's foci are not only on their own immediate surroundings; awareness of their place in the wider world was evident in a Community Soundings study for the CPR (Alexander & Hargreaves, 2007). The researchers undertook 19 witness sessions with 197 children across England. Children expressed pessimism about the future, citing fears about factors in their neighbourhoods such as strangers, gangs of older teenagers and crime. They were also worried about global threats such as terrorism, poverty and climate change. However, where schools addressed such issues children felt empowered to tackle some of them, such as environmental matters.

The generational distinctions between childhood and adulthood appear to be clear in children's thinking. Postman (1994) observed that children in the USA were fully aware of a distinction between childhood and adulthood and viewed that distinction as important. Mayall's (2003) study conducted between 1997 and 1999, with 139 young people aged 9–11 and 12–13 living in London, UK, showed that their understandings of childhood were primarily learnt in the home. This learning was predominantly in the context of their relationships with their parents whereby the adults' definitions gave meaning to their status as children, and organised their lives. There are clearly wide-ranging complex socio-cultural factors which interact to shape children's notion of childhood. However, Mayall's (2003) study and that of Cullingford (2006) suggest that children often view schools and home as separate parts of their lives. Similarly, later research conducted by Mayall for the CPR (Alexander, 2010) also showed that children tended to see home as a private place and were resistant to schools making inroads into it, because they saw home as 'free time'.

This present study recognises the importance of the need to hear children's views about childhood (McKechnie, 2002), a theme echoed by the CPR (Alexander, 2010) which calls for children's views to be taken seriously in education. However, there are important ontological and epistemological challenges facing researchers who explore the child's voice. Komulainen (2007) suggests that there is no individual voice, with voices instead being intertwined with others. From this viewpoint, it may be difficult to separate a child's views from those of others given that children may be influenced by peers and adults without always being fully aware of this process. The situation is further complicated by the recognition that children have agency to negotiate meaning in dialogue with others (Tangen, 2008), whereby they actively shape and reshape their own views.

This study explores the question, 'what is a child?', from the perspective of children. Previous studies such as those cited above have largely focussed on what children deem to be important in their lives and have often been ethnographic projects. This study differs by posing a direct question as to how children define 'a child'. Additional data are also presented here which are drawn from other questions exploring children's understandings of the relational components of adulthood and childhood. Combined, the answers to these questions illuminate these young people's understandings of what it means to be a child.

Method

A group of 56 children aged 7–11 with a median age of 9 were interviewed in groups of approximately five, in their school in a town in the East Midlands of England. The catchment area was largely one of relative economic deprivation, with most jobs being low paid. Informed consent (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007; Greig, MacKay, & Taylor, 2007) was obtained from the school, the parents/legal guardians and the children. In total, the parents/legal guardians of 60 children gave their consent. One child did not wish to take part, and three others were absent during the interview days. The final sample was comprised of 56 children – 29 girls and 27 boys. Children were grouped horizontally by age, taken from the same class, so that they were comfortable working with children they knew well. Twelve groups were formed and each group, with the exception of two, consisted of mixed genders. The two groups which were single-gendered (both female) arose out of circumstance

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in terms of availability of the children at the time, minimising disruption to classroom timetabling and children's learning.

The primary method employed was interviews, selected because they are well suited for eliciting respondents' perceptions (Silverman, 2000). A group setting was used as it was potentially less intimidating for children and also allowed for the discussion to develop amongst them (Cohen et al., 2007). Importantly it also enabled children to remain silent if they preferred (Lewis, 2008). The interviews were semi-structured in nature, thereby allowing for a degree of flexibility in the questioning so that the content could be expanded and further probing undertaken if necessary (Cohen et al., 2007).

The setting in which research with children is conducted is important (Tisdall, Davis, & Gallagher, 2010). The school was chosen as it was a familiar space and offered an opportunity to participate with their peers although a limitation was that children could repeat their peers' responses even if they did not concur with their own views. The group method also made it more difficult to separate individual voices although doing so is perhaps impossible even in one-to-one interviews as the voice may be intertwined with those of others, for example, parents. Another disadvantage, as Spyrou (2011, p. 155) indicates, is that the highly structured environment of the school can lead to children producing what they believe to be the correct answer, reflecting the usual daily discourse of a teacher asking questions. Similarly, Waller and Bitou (2011) caution that adult-designed research methods can lead to children responding and participating in ways which replicate the dynamics of power inherent in the teacher–pupil relationship. In order to minimise these limitations, the questions were based on the premise that the adult researcher was finding it difficult to remember what it felt like to be a child and was interested in gathering the children's views of their current experiences. In this way, the teacher–pupil power dynamic was shifted so that the children became the teachers, teaching the adult what it was like to be a child.

Findings

Data are presented in two forms: quantitative in order to present overall findings for easier comparison and to demonstrate the range and relative frequencies of specific answers in detail; and qualitative in order to represent the child's voice. The section begins with a presentation of data from an initial direct question which asked children to define 'a child'. Data from additional questions which explored their experience of being a child in more depth and their preferences for either childhood or adulthood are subsequently detailed prior to analysis. Categorisations, whilst appearing relatively clear cut, are framed with the recognition that data gathered from children are invariably 'messy' or ambiguous (Komulainen, 2007; Spyrou, 2011), as indeed is the case with qualitative research with adults too.

What is a child?

The direct question posed to elicit the participants' definitions of a child was framed as follows: 'Imagine that a creature from another planet came to Earth and saw human beings for the first time. The creature sees adults and children and does not understand the difference between them. The creature asks you 'what is a child?' How would you answer the question?'

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In total, 65 explanations were recorded which were subsequently coded and grouped by theme. The themes were: physical descriptors (*N* = 27, 41%), lifestyle descriptors (*N* = 18, 28%), behavioural descriptors (*N* = 16, 25%) and criteria-based descriptors (*N* = 4, 6%).

Physical descriptors

The most frequently occurring theme, comprising just over two-fifths of all answers (*N* = 27, 41%), related to physical descriptors with the majority of these (*N* = 24, 89%) relating to a child being a smaller version of an adult. The word 'small' was used to indicate physical size and age, as in 'a small person' relative to those who were older and taller. Joe, aged 10, said, 'A child is a little man or woman' and 7-year-old Ruby described a child as 'a baby who grows up to be ginormous'. References to size were more common in the older age group than in the 7–8-year-olds.

Whilst physical size was dominant in these responses, it was not used in isolation, and the responses were frequently multi-layered. For example, there was a sense of being on an child–adult continuum which also included varying behavioural characteristics lending to some fuzziness of data. Adam, aged 9, said, 'it then grows up and becomes a adult, which is very sensible', whilst his classmate Kian explained, '…yes, a small person who's not as old as adults but a bit more immature than adults'. Such responses also embodied indications of socially constructed definitions of childhood and adulthood, sometimes related to different behaviours. Furthermore, children's answers indicated a clear sense of time and how the future would impact on their identity as their status changed to that of adult; a sense of becoming. For example, Rebecca, aged 7, commented 'I'd say children are just like tiny adults but they're still learning how to be an adult'.

Lifestyle descriptors

The second largest category related to lifestyle descriptors which, according to the children, differentiated them from adults (*N* = 18, 28%). These related to how children: play and have fun (*N* = 5); have restrictions placed upon them which adults do not have (*N* = 5); go to school rather than having jobs (*N* = 4); have people to care for them rather than having to look after themselves (*N* = 2); watch children's television programmes (*N* = 1); and have less 'power' than adults (*N* = 1). Whilst some of these themes also identify specific behaviours, they are differentiated from the 'behavioural descriptors' below because these were representations of how children and adults live their lives differently by virtue of their age and the roles deemed applicable to the respective generations.

Restrictions were cited more frequently in the older age group, with the 9- and 10-year-olds being more concerned about being told what to do and not being allowed outside compared to the 7- and 8-year-olds. Liam, aged 10, described how adults 'can do more or less what they want, but we have things that we have to do like either be taught at school or at home'. Nine-year-old Aaron, in a different group, was concerned about the freedoms which children lacked such as not being able to go out alone. He lamented that whilst adults could go to the cinema to watch any film they wanted, children could not because some films are 'scary and some have rude language'. However, data were ambiguous in places. For example, restrictions were primarily seen as negative because of a lack of freedom and power but

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simultaneously positive because it meant that children were protected by adults. Indeed, in this latter example, two children challenged the notion of 'restriction' itself, perceiving it to be evidence 'that your mum and dad care about you' rather than an imposition of power. This category related closely to findings drawn from other questions relating to generational issues, which are detailed below.

Behavioural descriptors

Specific behaviours (*N* = 16, 25%) were also described. Children instinctively described them comparatively, stating that children were: less sensible/mature than adults (*N* = 7); intelligent/always learning (*N* = 5); annoying (*N* = 2); more energetic (*N* = 1); and more easily excitable (*N* = 1). These responses were often juxtaposed with adults' behaviour such as Malik's response: '[A child] is a bit silly, not like grown-ups who are boring and don't do fun things'.

Criteria-referenced descriptors

Finally, there were four (6%) statements which classified children by specific criteria, and were spread evenly across the age groups: a child is identifiable by virtue of their age (*N* = 2); and by the fact that they are called a child (*N* = 2). Aaron suggested that 'a child is like between 0 to like 12, I would say, or like to 13'.

Comparing childhood with adulthood

These definitions and key features of childhood provided insight into the children's conceptualisations, but further depth was gained by triangulating responses to additional questions pertaining to their experience of childhood and preference of being either a child or an adult. A fuller discussion of this comparative data is published elsewhere (Adams, 2013), but this paper draws out the key findings which illuminate the children's earlier responses to the question 'what is a child?'

Given the relational nature of childhood and adulthood (Alanen, 2001; Mayall, 2001, 2003; Qvortrup, 2008), children were asked which of the two phases would be their most preferred stage of life. A total of 49 children responded with 31 (63%) citing childhood as the ideal state, five (10%) preferring the prospect of adulthood and 13 (27%) being undecided, expressing the advantages and disadvantages of both. Of the 31 who preferred childhood, the majority did so because of their negative perceptions of adulthood (Adams, 2013), and answers often related to the aforementioned physical, lifestyle and behavioural descriptors.

The children's awareness of their physical size in particular also had bearing on other aspects of their experience of childhood, such as feeling vulnerable in the presence of older people. Cally, aged 8, said,

> sometimes we go to a very busy space where there's lots of people and I feel quite small. You feel a bit like people don't really care as they stand on your toes.

Specifically, teenagers were cited as potentially threatening in part due to their greater physical size. Eight-year-old Carrie explained that 'sometimes people come up to you and threaten you as a kid but when you're older they'll get used to you'.

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Lifestyle issues were again prominent in the longer discussions. The younger children in particular saw adulthood as boring in comparison to childhood which was largely deemed fun and a time to play. Eight-year-old Emily rejoiced that children can 'do fun stuff' in contrast to grown-ups who, as her friend Carrie noted, 'always sit down and watch TV'.

For the older children, the emphasis was less on adulthood being boring but more on it being stressful, uninviting and tedious, and often linked to distinctive behaviours. Whitney offered a long list of the negative aspects of her mother's life – paying bills on time in order to avoid fines, cleaning the house and tidying the garden, mending things that are broken, cleaning up 'dog mess' and having to check the prices of products in the supermarket before buying them. Ten-year-old Grace explained:

> When you're an adult you've just got to think about work and money and when you're a kid you can just play and just play, be with your friends and you just do, like, do, have fun.

In contrast, however, there were also positive aspects to adults' lifestyles and behaviours. Whitney acknowledged that adults have freedom to go on holiday without asking permission, go to pubs and have the opportunity to stay up until midnight without being shouted at for trying to avoid bedtime. The possibilities of new, restriction-free, lifestyles that adulthood would bring were welcomed by many of the children, who sometimes saw these factors as a trade-off against the tedium of household chores and worries that adulthood often entailed.

There were areas of debate for children which also demonstrated their agency in negotiating meaning with each other, and indicated different conceptions. For example, 8-year-old Molly challenged her classmates' assertion that adulthood and adults were boring. She argued that it would be impossible to be bored 'if you're a story writer like William Shakespeare … cos you have all these ideas in your head and you just want to write them down'. Being famous was an attractive proposition, she suggested, because 'you simply would not have time to be bored'. Indeed, of those who favoured adulthood (N = 5), the advantages of being older brought potential lifestyle opportunities such as high-paying careers, including being a professional footballer or a model. When 7-year-old Lucas contemplated his prospects he said, 'If you're a footballer and you're really, really good, you get to have thousands and thousands of pounds'. David, of the same age, who saw advantages and disadvantages to belonging to both generations, was interested in the prospect of growing older so that he could 'get a mansion'. The children's present and future selves were regularly evident in their conversations.

Analysis and discussion

In key areas of the findings, themes resonate with theory prevalent in literature. These themes include evidence of children's agency (Fattore et al., 2009; James & James, 2008; Qvortrup, 1994); a sense of the relational and generational components of childhood and adulthood (Alanen, 2001; Mayall, 2001, 2003; Qvortrup, 2008); and notions of children as beings rather than being viewed simply as adults-in-the-making (Uprichard, 2008). However, there are two areas which showed subtle but potentially important digressions from the dominant sociological discourse: a

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heightened awareness and importance of the biological basis of childhood; and a strong awareness of their future selves combined with a perception of their current selves as, at least in part, adults-in-the-making. The analysis focuses primarily on these two digressions and is further contextualised in light of the CPR.

Childhood: the interplay of the biological and the social construction

The theoretical discourse of the social construction of childhood was clearly applicable when interrogating the children's responses. Unsurprisingly, they defined childhood and adulthood based on their own experiences and those of others around them and at times consciously negotiated aspects of their lives. This process was notable in issues of perceived unfairness, such as trying to negotiate the time at which they went to bed and at what age they would be allowed to go out unaccompanied by adults. Thus, the children's roles as social actors with agency (Qvortrup, 1994; James & James, 2008; Fattore et al., 2009) were evident, supporting the social constructionist approach to defining childhood. Likewise, the well-documented components of the relational and generational aspects of childhood (Alanen, 2001; Mayall, 2001, 2003; Qvortrup, 2008) were also inherent in the children's understandings of themselves as children compared to adults.

However, among the constructions were strong indicators of the centrality and importance of the biological basis of childhood, comprising just over two-fifths of the responses to the question 'what is a child?' The biological also reappeared in the later conversations comparing childhood with adulthood. The findings echo earlier studies which showed that children place importance on their bodies (e.g. Christensen, 2000), although in this case, the responses were contextualised as answers to questions about how they would define a child.

Within sociological literature, the relationship between the biological and the socially constructed is debated. As James and Prout (1997) observe, social constructionism challenged biologically reductionist approaches to understanding childhood but raised questions about the extent to which children are subject to biology. Since their text was published, more theoretical work has been undertaken on the interplay between the biological/body and social construction. For example, Prout (2005) argues that the study of childhood should avoid biological–cultural dualism and instead consider how the two both play a part in shaping childhood. As Smith (2010) asserts, whilst biology and culture are distinct, they cannot be separated, with James and Prout (1997) suggesting that meaning is given to the biological through culture. To an extent this latter view is applicable to some of the children's comments, particularly when they portrayed the advantages of being small. For example, it could be argued that being able to hide in more spaces by virtue of being tiny was an example of how children constructed one aspect of their size relevant to a form of play which may itself be deemed socially constructed.

Data from this study raise the question of why the biological might be so important to these young people. One possible reason was that it appeared to impact on their daily lives in very real ways. In addition to the positives cited, other children considered small size to be a negative because it made them feel vulnerable around some older, physically larger people, particularly teenagers. The latter negative situation may well involve elements of social construction. For example, it is a concern of some writers that particular elements of the media demonise young people

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(Kellett, 2010; Mayall, 2010), which in turn can influence people's negative perceptions of (some) young people.

The portrayal of teenagers as potential threats is not only evident in the media. In the locality of this study, narratives of bullies residing at the local secondary school were part of the social discourse, evident in the older children's conversations. However, with regards to the biological, feelings of disempowerment in the company of larger people who may have (or may be perceived to have) threatening demeanours are a phenomenon recognised by most people, adults and children alike. Personal safety does consist of a combination of cultural connotations, perceptions and social constructions, but arguably the biological human need for self-preservation is at its core. Being relatively smaller and physically weaker than others, particularly those who are considered to be intimidating, can give rise to feelings of disempowerment and hence are important to children.

The interplay of the biological and the social construction: implications for future research, education and the CPR

A key question arising from the data relates to where the children obtained their ideas of what constitutes 'a child'. Influences are, of course, complex. They include a wide range of socio-cultural influences which are played out in different settings such as the home, wider communities and the media, which would be impossible to isolate. Mayall (2003) argues that the home is the first place where children learn what childhood is, and her data suggested that the home is where children learnt about obedience and negotiation, about how to participate in family life, how they were dependent on their family and how independence could be attained. In this current study, similar themes were evident. For example, when children discussed the lifestyle descriptors, these were founded on their experiences, particularly the power relations between themselves and their parents. Naturally, wider social norms also influence such boundaries between child and adult, the intricacies of which are socially constructed by wider community to an extent (such as at what age a parent allows a child to walk into town unaccompanied).

The media has been the focus of concern about its portrayal of childhood, particularly for giving children access to material not generally deemed suitable for children (Kehily, 2009), and for contributing to a celebrity culture which values individualism over community (Layard & Dunn, 2009). Whilst there was little reference to celebrity culture in this study, it is likely that images of childhood have permeated children's understanding of childhood, although questioning about the influence of media was not undertaken.

The school itself is an important arena in which notions of childhood are shaped, being mediated through policy and practice, further informed by staff's own perceptions about childhood, and also influenced by resources such as texts and digital media which are utilised in the classroom. Policy is discussed further below.

Another influence on the children's definitions may be termed 'instinctive knowing', relating particularly to the biological. Although James and Prout (1997) maintain that the social assigns meaning to the physical, it would be erroneous to negate the importance of the biological to these children, especially when describing the nature and impact of the relatively small size on their status as children.

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This study did not seek to interrogate the sources of the children's understandings, but further research which also drew on the views and practices of parents and teachers would be valuable in answering this question of the conceptions' origins.

One of the issues arising from the findings of this study relate to another aspect of the CPR's recommendations, that children's experiences and voices should be respected, and that teacher education is fully informed by such perspectives. To complement theoretical discussions about childhood, empirical studies with children are also important to give them a voice. When findings have a different emphasis to theory, such as the predominance of the biological in this study, results give rise to areas of consideration in ITT. For example, the notion of insider epistemology when researching childhood (Tangen, 2008) poses particular challenges. It is widely recognised that one of the limitations of adults writing about childhood relates to the lapse of time since they were at that early stage of life. Nostalgia can adversely affect adults' thinking. It can be difficult for adults to remove the filters/lenses through which they view the world, making access back to early states problematic (Adams, 2010; Jones, 2001). In addition, natural lapses inherent in memory function include bias (Schacter, 2002) which can further adversely affect childhood recollections.

Children's specific attention to the biological also complicates comprehending children's experiences and perspectives. If the biological reality of being small and its resultant feelings of disempowerment are central to children, then adults are potentially challenged when understanding children's views, not least because the majority are no longer the size of a child. With regards to the interplay between constructionism and biology, it is also important to refer back to Lee's (2009) caution that the former can potentially overemphasise the imagination's shaping of the world. If some children, as those in this study suggest, feel that the biology of size impacts on their lives in practical ways, some of which are placing them in fearful positions, then overstating the social construction of those views can potentially negate the importance of the child's voice.

Children: past, present and future selves

As several authors (e.g. Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008; Holloway & Valentine, 2000; Mason & Tipper, 2008) observe, there has been an increasing emphasis in theory and practice on considering children in their 'present', as 'beings'. I concur with this focus on the present but also suggest that children's perspectives need to inform the discussion. For example, Mason and Tipper's (2008) study of children's concepts of kinship affirms the importance of children's present when defining kinship but also the relevance of children using their pasts to construct their notions of kinship; the past and the present being interconnected in the children's understandings.

In this study, children did not tend to refer to the past. Only five made reference to themselves as having been babies or toddlers but this low incidence may have been a consequence of there being no direct questions about when they were younger. Instead the children focused very much on the present, on themselves as 'being', but in addition, they also projected into the future, aware of their sense of 'becoming'. This finding lends support to Uprichard's (2008, p. 303) argument which suggests that both of these categories are problematic if viewed separately and that children should be seen simultaneously as both 'beings and becomings'. Whilst the present is often emphasised over becoming in the literature, children in this study clearly had a strong sense of themselves as future, older people who

would later be reclassified as adults. They also had visions of how that would affect their behaviours and lifestyle.

Certainly children's future projection does not negate the importance of their current sense of self, which is highly significant. However, a sense of future becoming also provides insights into children's current sense of self and their cultural contexts. For example, whilst I had no knowledge of how talented a footballer Lucas may or may not be, his desire to be a professional expressed a variety of aspects of himself: his *present* passion for the game; societal endorsement of the game as a profession and its lucrative possibilities; his self-efficacy with regards to sport; and his *future* ambitions and vision of himself as an adult.

The children's self-image as adult-in-the-making is not entirely unexpected given the combination of the biological and the socially constructed; the children automatically placed themselves on the child–adult continuum. This occurred from the initial question 'what is a child', even before the notion of adulthood was subsequently raised, in line with the biological trajectory of human development. Likewise, their awareness of the mass media's bombardment of teenage and adult images (often targeting children as consumers) reflects the social construction of different categories afforded to people according to their age and lifestyle.

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Past, present and future selves: implications for future research, education and the CPR

The notion of past, present and future self is both implicit and explicit within education. Schools in the UK, amongst many other countries, address children as beings, particularly through policies on personal, social and emotional development. Whilst the content and aims of education vary internationally, the preparation of children for adult life is one important aim which frames children as adults-in-the-making. Yet this aim needs to be achieved with a balance of also ensuring a 'good childhood' during schooling. As studies (e.g. Layard & Dunn, 2009; UNICEF, 2007) suggest, many children, even some in wealthy countries, do not have what may be termed 'good childhoods', however those may be culturally defined. Issues for future consideration, and for debate in ITT, include how policy shapes childhood in the context of the present and future self. In 2013 the Secretary of State for Education announced a consultation on a new draft primary curriculum (Department for Education, 2013). Proposals met with dissent from 100 academics who argued, in a letter to a national newspaper, *The Independent*, that the proposed new curriculum promoted rote learning at the expense of understanding, placed too many demands on children too young, and that teaching would be too heavily focused on test results (Garner, 2013). Such critiques raise questions about how 'the child' and 'childhood' are conceptualised in education policy. For example, the non-statutory Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education programme focuses on the child as both being and becoming, but if the content of the statutory subjects is deemed to be future oriented in terms of test outcomes, tensions will arise. As noted above, James and James (2004) argue that school curricula, which are prescriptive and involve regular testing with results published in publicly available league tables, frames childhood as a time of preparation for adulthood. James and James go on to suggest that the regime of testing assists in predicting the contributions that children will make to society in the future. Such claims would benefit from systematic study.

Futhermore, the degree to which past, present and future images of self are interrelated and shaped in part by education policy offer an interesting avenue for exploration.

Closing remarks

Children's conceptions of childhood are naturally shaped by a wide and complex set of factors which may at times contradict each other and are almost impossible to isolate. Nevertheless, the amount of time spent in formal education inevitably means that school plays an important role in contributing to young people's notions of childhood and adulthood, although these may often be unconscious on the part of staff.

Certainly, a limitation of this study was that it was carried out in one geographical location so the results cannot be generalised. Further, the study was a snapshot into the children's views and their responses may have differed if undertaken at another time of year. The depth obtainable in a longitudinal study was not available. However, the method has value for gathering children's initial, immediate responses. As Spyrou (2011, p. 156) observes, whilst building rapport with children over the longer term can facilitate deeper layers of meaning, these are not necessarily more authentic or true. That is not to deny the importance and value of longitudinal studies; although in this case time and funding restrictions prevented a longitudinal survey but such an extended study could potentially offer a valuable contribution to the field.

Despite the limitations of this study, the results suggest that some elements of what these children deemed to be definitions of childhood (and adulthood) may have greater emphasis than are generally evident in theoretical perspectives. Specifically, this emphasis occurs in relation to the importance of the biological component of childhood and perceptions of themselves as adults-in-the-making.

Children's self-concepts are of fundamental importance in their development of identity, and many education systems worldwide acknowledge, value and address this via their programmes on personal, social and emotional development. Due to the centrality of the child in education, I concur with the recommendation of the CPR that initial teacher training be refocused to include critical explorations of childhood which in themselves will raise important and challenging issues for trainees. After all, at the centre of the education system is the child who is actively living, learning and negotiating what it means to be 'a child', as constructed by their culture(s). By facilitating trainees to actively engage with the concept of childhood, theory and practice can be explored, challenged and developed in such a way as to respect children's experience (Alexander, 2010) and enhance relationships between staff and children. In turn, conceptualisations have the potential to inform theoretical discourse on childhood, which can shape educational policy and practice to ensure that the 'child' – both biological and socially constructed, both being and becoming – is at the heart of the education system.

Acknowledgements

Sincere thanks are extended to the school, parents and children who gave their informed consent for this study to be conducted.

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Funding

This work was supported by the School of Culture, Education and Innovation and the Centre for Educational Research and Development at Bishop Grosseteste University who provided grants of £2500 and £1800, respectively.

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